

Fairbury Actress Was Early Silent Film Movie Star

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The parents of Hazel Ona Keener were Lemuel M. Keener (1875-1941) and Lillian Reed (1870-1943). Hazel O. Keener was born in Fairbury on October 22, 1904. Mr. Keener was a farmer who moved his family quite often.

The September 1905 Blade recounted that Mr. and Mrs. Keener and daughter, of Fairbury, were the guests of Mr. and Mrs. Jesse Green, Sunday, in McDowell.

By the 1910 U.S. Census, Hazel and her parents had moved to Wythe Township in Hancock County, Illinois. This location is just east of Keokuk, Iowa.

Hazel attended schools in the Quad Cities area. By the 1920 U.S. Census, Hazel and her parents were living in Anderson, Missouri. This is south of Cape Girardeau, Missouri.

In 1921, the Chicago Tribune newspaper held a beauty contest to determine the most beautiful girl in the Central West. Three judges selected the most beautiful girls from Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Chicago. Each Sunday, the newspaper would announce the winner of one of the five states plus Chicago. Each of the six girls won \$1,000. This would be equivalent to \$14,200 in today's dollars. The overall winner received \$10,000. The grand prize would be equal to \$142,000 in today's dollars.

In the May 15, 1921 edition, Hazel O. Keener was announced as the prettiest girl in Iowa. The Tribune article recounted that Hazel lived in Bettendorf, Iowa, with her father, mother, and a brother. They lived in a small bungalow, and her father worked as a mechanic in one of the car shops.

The three judges awarded the honors to Miss Keener for her aristocratic bearing, regal statuesque, distinguished air, and a perfectly modeled face. "If there is such a thing as aristocracy in our democratic country, she has it," they commented. Hazel Keener was just sixteen years old when she won this award.

The Tribune reporter asked Hazel what she was going to do with the \$1,000 prize money. Hazel replied, "Daddy's health has not been good, and he wants to get out of the shops on to a farm so I would like to buy that for him. And then I want to buy mother a lot of nice clothes, and then I would like to get myself a really nice tailored suit, shoes with short vamps and low heels, and a beautiful hat: and then I would like to help my brother to go back and finish his university work."

The reporter noted that Miss Keener's ambition was to go on stage. She was five feet, six inches tall, and weighed 125 pounds. Her mother was from Virginia, and her father from Tennessee. Hazel's beautifully modulated voice and a charming enunciation indicated her

southern parentage. Her hair was brown, wavy, and quite bountiful. Her eyes were hazel and most expressive. Her skin was creamy, and her features classic. She had the poise and grace of one that was years older. She would rather act than cook or play basketball or go to dances.

Her mother reported that Hazel was a great little mother's helper. Her mother also stated that Hazel was the youngest to graduate in her class. Hazel did not win the overall grand prize in the Chicago Tribune contest. Flora Mae Hackett of Indiana was declared the overall winner.

After the beauty contest ended, Hazel and her mother headed to Hollywood. In December of 1921, Hazel landed her first movie job in the film *Penrod* by Booth Tarkington. She was a supporting actress in that film.

In 1922, Hazel married actor Francis Hubert Smith. This marriage ended in 1923 because of annulment or divorce. In 1924, the United States Western Association of Motion Picture Advertisers started a promotional campaign called the WAMPAS Baby Stars. Each year, this campaign honored 13 to 15 young actresses they believed to be on the threshold of movie stardom. In 1924, Hazel Keener was selected as one of the WAMPAS Baby Stars.

In early 1924, the Monogram Pictures Corporation released six new western pictures. Fred Thomson was the lead actor in all of these films. Hazel Keener was a supporting actress in these films. This film company also had 10 million copies of Hazel's photo printed to use as promotional material for these six films.

Later in 1924, Hazel landed her first lead role in a Fred Thompson western film titled *The Dangerous Coward*. Film critics thought Hazel did an excellent job of developing her ability to become a lead actress.

In 1925, Hazel was a supporting actress in the silent film *The Freshman*. Hazel became close friends with the female lead actress in this film, Jobyna Ralston. Incredibly, this almost 100-year-old film is still available for viewing on YouTube. This film is likely the most critically acclaimed film that Hazel appeared in.

Also in 1925, Hazel did a lengthy interview with a Chicago Tribune reporter. The reporter was interested in how difficult it was for her to become a movie star after winning the big beauty contest. Hazel explained that it was not easy to succeed as an actress. Her mother and her only had a few dollars left of the \$1,000 prize when they arrived in Hollywood. She usually had to pay for her own clothing for her acting jobs. To make ends meet, she often took photography jobs or modeling jobs in between acting assignments. She was often turned down for acting jobs because her good looks would detract moviegoers from watching the lead actors in a film.

Hazel kept working at it and finally achieved financial success in the film *The Freshman*. This film's success helped her to land subsequent acting jobs. She took the

advice of veteran actresses and established an emergency fund to pay her expenses between films.

In 1931, at age 26, Hazel married a salesman from Grand Rapids, Michigan. His name was Ross Wilson Chatelain. They had no children. Hazel continued to appear in various films as a supporting actress. In 1941, she had a role in the film *Murder by Invitation*. This film is also viewable on YouTube.

In the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s, Miss Keener had small parts in approximately twenty movies. She acted in television with roles in episodes of *Judge Roy Bean* (1956) and *Hopalong Cassidy* (1954). In the latter stages of her life, Hazel became a minister in California. She passed away at age 74 in Ventura, California.

